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Country note**

Lao People's Democratic Republic

Summary

The Executive Director presents the country note for the Lao People's Democratic Republic for a programme of cooperation for the period 2002 to 2006.

The situation of children and women

1. Over the past few years, the Lao People's Democratic Republic has made significant progress in guaranteeing children their rights to survival. However, there is still much to be attained in terms of the other rights of children at the critical stages of their lives.

2. Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women has accelerated progress in ensuring the rights of children and women. The Constitution of 1991 has enshrined many of the elements of these rights. There have been some changes in the legal Penal Code related to child abuse. The establishment of the National Commission on Mothers and Children by Prime Ministerial Decree is an example of the government policy for protecting children. The Government submitted its first report to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in late 1997 and, as the Committee noted, more needs to be done in order to fulfil these rights and to reach

* E/ICEF/2001/2.

** An addendum to the present report containing the final country programme recommendation will be submitted to the Executive Board for approval at its second regular session of 2001.

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out to communities with information about children's and women's rights. There is a growing civil society influence and involvement in promoting child rights.

3. The Lao People's Democratic Republic is considered a least developed country, with a population estimated at 5 million. It is characterized by a high degree of geographic, cultural and linguistic diversity, and poor infrastructure. The country's rich traditions survive, including respect for cultural and religious beliefs and practices, and utilization of consensus in decision-making.

4. Child survival indicators remain among the worst in Asia and the world. The 2000 figures show an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 75 per 1,000 live births, an under-five mortality rate (U5MR) of 97 per 1,000 live births and a maternal mortality ratio (MMR) of 500 per 100,000, making it the second highest in Asia. The fertility rate for 2000 is 4.9.

5. In 1999, the EPI-Plus (expanded programme on immunization) strategy has achieved routine immunization coverage rates of 63 per cent for anti-tuberculosis vaccine, 71 per cent for measles vaccine, 56 per cent for combined diphtheria/pertussis/tetanus vaccine and 64 per cent for oral polio vaccine. Some 55 per cent of women of reproductive age had received at least two doses of tetanus toxoid. The eradication of polio has been a major focus of National Immunization Days, and the Lao People's Democratic Republic was declared polio free in October 2000. Immunization services reach 95 per cent of all villages in the country. Incidences of tetanus, measles, whooping cough, diphtheria and tuberculosis are all decreasing.

6. HIV/AIDS control and prevention is one of the major concerns of the Government. As a result of labour migration to Thailand, there has been a visible increase in the number of HIV/AIDS cases in the border areas, especially near Savannakhet.

7. In 1999, 90 per cent of the total population had access to iodized salt, vitamin A supplementation had improved to cover 80 per cent of children under five years old and 90 per cent of mothers initiated breastfeeding.

8. Currently, 54 per cent of the population have access to water, while sanitation coverage is 34 per cent. A school latrine construction programme has now been developed, reaching nearly 4 per cent of schools. In addition to these physical improvements, the Ministries of Education and Health have a dynamic school education project to teach children the importance of hand-washing before eating and after using the latrine.

9. In the past decade, progress has been made to improve both access to and the quality of primary education. However, many children, especially minorities and girls, have little or no access to basic education. Net enrolment in primary schools, as well as the overall literacy rate, have both risen from 60 per cent in 1995 to 77 per cent in 1999. However, these gains have been primarily for the *Lao Loum*, the majority group. None of the three major ethnic groups has a total literacy rate over 50 per cent, and for females who are not *Lao Loum*, the rate ranged between 12-33 per cent in 1995. There are serious problems in ensuring regular school enrolment, attendance and completion of primary school, and transition to higher levels of education, especially for girls. Of the nation's school-age population between the ages of 6-10 years, 23 per cent were not enrolled in 1998, and 27 per cent of all girls in this age range were not in school.

Lessons learned from past cooperation

10. As a result of evaluations and reviews, certain lessons learned have been identified as critical to programme implementation. They include: frequent and better organized monthly and quarterly meetings with the Ministry of Health; the use of government channels of communications at provincial and district levels to broadcast in minority languages; the use of small entrepreneurs in the water and sanitation sector; improved coordination with partners, United Nations organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and others, which has been positive for programme implementation; and the involvement of villagers, particularly women, in decentralized participatory planning.

11. Areas for improvement include: education and information-sharing related to the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; coordination and collaboration between partners, particularly with regard to multisectoral interventions; human resources capacity development at all levels; applied research and data collection; gender balance in all aspects of the planning and implementation cycles; and meaningful and genuine youth participation in programme formulation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Proposed country programme strategy

12. The strategic framework of the programme of cooperation for 2002-2006 is founded on the principle of the progressive realization of children's and women's rights on one hand, and achieving demonstrable results on the other. It operates within the policy framework set by the Lao People's Democratic Republic National Socio-Economic Development Plan and contributes to government efforts to reduce gender and ethnic disparity and to improve access to services and information. It has been developed in collaboration with the Government and other development partners, and is in line with the proposed United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

13. The overall objective of the programme is to support the Government within the framework of the New Global Agenda for Children. The programme of cooperation will focus especially on improving family and community capacities to care for young children. It will work with local government agencies to help provide all families with basic information to support their decision-making processes, while recognizing that family empowerment in the absence of gender analysis will not sufficiently address gender inequalities within families. It will seek to ensure the participation, through advocacy and social mobilization, of the most marginalized in the planning, implementation and monitoring of development programmes, including children at the provincial/district level. It will address the rights of children and women in a holistic manner across sectors and age groups. It will improve the quality and utilization of health services.

14. The programme will work to strengthen the capacity of and increase its collaboration with the Commissions for Mothers and Children at all levels. Sustainability and the maintenance and upkeep of existing facilities remain common objectives of both the Government and UNICEF.

15. The programme of cooperation will be comprised of five components: survival and growth; early learning and preparation for life; water and environmental sanitation (WES); protection and care; and advocacy, communication and monitoring. They are linked intersectorally through integrated programming.

16. The **survival and growth** programme will aim at helping to achieve the Government's 2020 goals of reducing IMR, U5MR, MMR and malnutrition. It will continue to support health policy development; the national immunization programme, including vaccine supply; the control of diarrhoea and acute respiratory infections, as part of the Integrated Management of Childhood Illness initiative; improved breastfeeding practices; nutrition; and safe motherhood. Health and nutrition information brought into the home will be central to the professional efforts to improve village attitudes about child growth and development, while also addressing gender disparities. A key feature will be to help parents better measure their children's growth and development. The programme of cooperation will place a renewed emphasis on women's health issues and health promotion. Malaria, the leading cause of death, will receive added emphasis. UNICEF will work closely with the Government and other development partners, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the Japan International Cooperation Agency, the United Nations Population Fund, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (AsDB), the European Union and the Save the Children Alliance.

17. The programme for **early learning and preparation for life** will further build community capacity to better plan for the future of their children through the use of the Lao Women Union's district-level planning approach. In the area of early childhood, the capacity of caregivers and community members to integrate and use new and existing knowledge related to childcare and "readiness" for school, including a gender component, will be increased. In the schools, access to and the provision of quality education will be improved by building the capacity of staff at all levels to develop and implement "child-centred" curricula and to encourage the participation of parents and communities in their children's learning. The likely partners include the World Bank, AsDB, the Australian Agency for International Development, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, UNDP, Save the Children Alliance, Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, World Education and *Ecoles sans frontières* (Schools without Borders).

18. The **WES** programme will continue to address the critical issue of childhood diarrhoea, which is still the second highest cause of child mortality in the country. The school sanitation component will be the flagship of action for behaviour change and will create awareness among teachers, children and their parents about hygiene, water, sanitation and health, using hand-washing as a key to reducing mortality and morbidity. UNICEF will work closely with international NGOs, UNDP, the World Bank, WHO and others.

19. For the newly developed **protection and care** programme, strategies will support improving the knowledge base about child protection, including the type, extent and magnitude of issues such as trafficking, sexual exploitation, substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, dangers from unexploded ordnance (UXO) and disability; prevention and early interventions at family and community levels; the promotion of more responsive and inclusive basic social services, rescue, recovery and reintegration; and improving justice for children. Advocacy about the vulnerability and exploitation of girls and boys as distinct groups, where appropriate, will focus

on raising community awareness concerning the potential dangers for children/youth and on young peoples' participation in the development and dissemination of this information. Strategies will support the Regional Strategic Framework for Child Protection. UNICEF will work with the Government and NGOs to help develop the juvenile justice system and services for the provision of adequate care, counselling and protective measures for youth, children and their families. UNICEF will also cooperate closely with members of the Save the Children Alliance and other NGOs, such as Handicap International, as well as with UNDP, the International Labour Organization/International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour and the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention.

20. Under **advocacy, communication and monitoring**, UNICEF will extend its advocacy work concerning the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, as well as its monitoring and reporting on implementation of the two Conventions by duty-bearers. UNICEF will better integrate its social mobilization activities to make more effective use of successful communication mechanisms, particularly in the areas of HIV/AIDS, UXO awareness and drug education. This will involve active collaboration with other organizations, particularly members of the Working Group and United Nations Theme Groups on HIV/AIDS, the European Union and the Save the Children Alliance. The existing outreach will be extended to ethnic minority communities. Girls, disabled children and children from ethnic minority communities will be further engaged in communication activities, and will serve as positive role models.

21. This programme of cooperation will adopt a number of cross-sectoral elements and strategies, such as the life cycle approach; decentralization; gender; capacity-building at all levels; reaching the unreached; improved coordination; monitoring of the two Conventions; and programme communication.

22. The Lao People's Democratic Republic and UNICEF will continue to work strategically with partners to enable children and women to fulfil their rights and expand their choices. These partnerships will begin at the district level with communities and local government, leading up to the national level.

Estimated programme budget

23. The estimated regular resources budget for the five-year period 2002-2006 will be allocated by programme on the basis of ongoing dialogue with the Government. Other resources funding will be sought for the programme based on locally raised funds and donor interest.

Estimated programme cooperation, 2002-2006[a]

(In thousands of United States dollars)

	Regular resources	*Other resources*	*Total*
Survival and growth	2 992	6 000	8 992
Early learning and preparation for life	2 119	7 500	9 619
Water and environmental sanitation	499	3 500	3 999
Protection and care	523	1 680	2 203
Advocacy, communication and monitoring	723	2 320	2 043
Cross-sectoral costs	762	-	762
Total	**7 618**	**21 000**	**28 618**

[a] These are indicative figures only which are subject to change once aggregate financial data are finalized.